

God Laughed

JOY

Mark 1:4-11, 2:18-20, John 15:11
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The late C.S. Lewis became a Christian in an unusual way. He was a typically British skeptic, thoroughly agnostic about things of the spirit. He was in the side car of his brother's motorcycle. They were on their way to the 200. At the beginning of the journey he was not a believer: at the end, he was. He described the experience in a perfectly delightful phrase which later became the title of one of his books: "Surprised by Joy". How different that is from the conversions involving terrible, self-convicting guilt, traumatic, emotional upheavals! How curious that a man's salvation might be described as "Surprised by Joy".

The idea shows up in a favorite Lewis book, The Screwtape Letters, a very clever anthology of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil on the subject of pursuing and seducing a man away from Christianity. Letter number ten is about joy. The senior devil writes to his subordinate, Screwtape: "What the real cause is we do not know. Something like it is expressed in much of that detestable art which the humans call Music, and something like it occurs in Heaven - a meaningless acceleration in the rhythm of celestial experience, quite opaque to us. Laughter of this kind does us no good and should always be discouraged. Besides, the phenomenon is of itself disgusting and a direct insult to the realism, dignity and austerity of Hell.

"Fun is closely related to Joy - a sort of emotional froth arising from the play instinct. It is very little use to us...it has wholly undesirable tendencies; it promotes charity, courage, contentment, and many other evils." (The Screwtape Letters, p. 57-58).

C.S. Lewis understood that joy, laughter, and fun were somehow fundamental in the matter of religious faith. And yet, religious people, of all people, seem not to know what to do with joy and laughter; seem, frankly, not to be comfortable having fun; seem sometimes to think it is bad to feel good.

For a scripture lesson this morning I have combined three separate readings which set the stage for an exploration of joy, as a religious phenomenon. The first reading was Mark's brief description of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. A strange man who evoked the memory of Israel's prophets came out of the desert preaching about evil, God's wrath and the necessity for repentance. He saw his purpose as preparing people for the judgment day. His method was to try to persuade people to be good by making them feel bad. There doesn't seem too much humor or joy in the figure of John the Baptist.

Jesus of Nazareth was attracted to him: by his moral integrity, perhaps: by his personal charisma, or the truth of what he was saying. He allowed John to baptize him and that experience became for Jesus the beginning of his own sense of mission.

His ministry, however, would be compared - immediately, and unfavorably, The second reading, just across the page from the first, still at the story, reveals a dramatic contrast between the two men - John's ag...and people asked him, "Why do John's disciples fast but not fast?" Jesus answered, somewhat cryptically - "Can the wedding the bridegroom is with them?" That is to say by comparison with Jesus' seemed like a wedding banquet. This man was inviting people calling it discipleship.

The third reading, one short sentence, is from the farewell discourses in the fourth Gospel, Jesus is summarizing "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

The style of life, and attitude toward religion which these passages attribute to Jesus are very much in line with the tradition of Old Testament scripture and the faith and experience of Israel.

One scholar suggests that "The first family to be called Hebrews had an infectious laugh". (What Happened to the Laughing Jesus? Outlook, 1/29/79, p.5), Abraham and Sarah, both far beyond the age when they could expect to be parents, reacted with laughter when Sarah became pregnant. Was it laughter at the absurdity - or the profound goodness of it all? Or was it, at least in part, a spicy giggle? - I hope so. In any event they laughed and they named their unlikely son Isaac, which means, in Hebrew, "laughter".

There is also laughter in the Old Testament at the expense of humanity. Psalm 2 describes God himself having a good chuckle at the pretentious strutting about of politicians who think they are really in control.

And beneath the witness of the Old Testament, there is a strong motif of joy because the created order, itself, is good: essentially, basically good. Old Testament people know that and live life with a kind of lusty abandon. They exhibit what Langdon Gilkey calls, in a helpful phrase, the "essential joy in being".

Jesus was part of all of that. He demonstrated His own sense of humor in a number of very funny stories. He told one which employed a clever pun in Aramaic about a proper religious man, who obeyed the prohibition against eating insects by straining a gnat out of his drink, but swallowing a camel in the process. Or the fellow who had a "two by four" in his eye, trying to pick a speck of dust out of someone else's eye: or the very rich man who was so pompous he went out and hired a bugler to walk in front of him as he went to give his alms.

New Testament scholars believe that that material was very funny. His hearers snickered at it, and the more they thought about it the more they clapped their sides and doubled over in raucous laughter. It was not meant to be polite. It was funny material.

Yet the New Testament never says that Jesus laughed or smiled. It would seem reasonable to conclude that He did, simply because His people had a sense of humor and His teaching includes wit, sarcasm, exaggeration and a sprinkling of puns. It would seem unreasonable to draw a conclusion on the basis of something the New Testament does not say. But that is exactly what the Christian Church did early in its history. Nowhere does it say that He laughed and smiled, and so the early church fathers concluded that He had not, and furthermore, that they should not.

Basil, the Father of Greek Monasticism, taught that laughter of any kind was wicked. John Chrysostom, a very influential early Christian preacher once said, "This world is not a theater in which we can laugh." (See Phipps in Outlook, op.cit.)

Thus began, at the outset of the Dark Ages, an idea of Jesus Christ without joy; an idea which would inspire the melancholy Christ of almost all religious art. And thus began a long history of Christian religion without laughter.

Part of the reason is that the early Christians forgot that their real religious heritage was Hebrew, and began to think like Greeks. The Greeks were dualists: all of reality could be divided into two categories - flesh and spirit: bad and good. The human body was essentially evil. The function of religion was to provide a way the true self could transcend the body. That is Greek thinking. It is not Hebrew. It is not Christian. But it prompted men to conclude that when Jesus said "deny yourself" what He really meant was deny pleasure: deny joy; stop enjoying yourself. It prompted men to conclude that being religious means withdrawing from life: the further the withdrawal, the holier the life. The hermit monk was the ideal: celibacy was the rule and the result has been fifteen hundred years of Christian religion fighting itself; on the one hand wanting to believe that God knew what He was doing when He created us the way we are and on the other hand trying to deny our bodies, appetites - and our essential joy in being.

The result, for instance, was Puritanism, which in excess was described as "the fear that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time." G.B. Shaw took delight that the Christian Church had been founded on its leaders' pun about Peter and the rock but had become so removed from its own background that - in his words - "it has become the Church where you must not laugh." (Phipps, Ibid.)

The fact is that religion isn't very happy and that religious institutions are among the least joyful places in our culture. Mark Twain somewhere said he wasn't interested in Heaven if it was like the church services he had attended, and I can't say that I blame him. An old friend of mine, a campus Pastor, used to say that if a totally uninitiated, objective observer were to stand on the corner and watch people leaving most of the Presbyterian Churches he knew, he would conclude that someone had died inside and the funeral had just taken place.

It is sad but elementary truth that for many if not most people church, and by association - religion, means drabness, dullness, boredom, sobriety, pomposity. For children public worship is a painful adult experience to be endured only if all other routes of escape are closed. For adults it is much the same: the music is often morbidly slow, deathly sweet, heads are bowed, hands folded, lips tight, seats hard, and if you're not unhappy when you arrive, you will be soon. It is sad but elementary truth that we expect joy to happen elsewhere: that laughter in Church is somewhat of an incongruity for us: that fun and religion are nearly opposites.

The recovery of joy in the life of the church is a priority for me. But the issue is much larger and more important than merely having a good time. There is a good case to be made for the suggestion that our health and our humanity depend on joy and laughter. Anthropologists know that we are the only animals who can laugh and that the best and most sensitive of us are the ones who can laugh at ourselves.

The philosophers and theologians know that we are all inclined to take ourselves too seriously: that we live much of our lives on the thin line dividing maturity from pomposity; that one of the ways we deal with our finiteness and the fact of our own death is to puff up our chests in manufactured self-importance in the here and now. One of the conclusions I am in the process of reaching is that the trouble-makers in this world are invariably the ones who are taking themselves too seriously and have no sense of humor, no ability to laugh at themselves. I'm coming to understand what a movie producer had in mind when he portrayed Christ as a clown. For a clown punctures our pretensions and lets us laugh at our posturing and thereby saves us from ourselves.

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Many
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The dictators of this world are ultimately funny caricatures: humanity which succumbed to its own self-importance. The implacable foe of the pathetic posturing of the tyrant is always the comedian. His role is vital: by poking fun he shows us the humanity of the high and mighty: and he prevents any of us from taking ourselves too seriously.

We need that - we need a little laughter and joy and unadulterated, genuine fun. Our life can become grim. Turn on the morning news and the things which happened the night before important enough to tell about the morning after are, almost without exception, tragic and sad things. By some quirk in our priorities "news" for us means how many people were murdered last night, how many rapes, armed robberies, fires and fatal accidents occurred in our city, how many politicians cheated, cities went bankrupt and how much more beef will cost next month. It wouldn't sell, I suppose, to give at least equal time to how many happy things happened the night before: how many people were honest, faithful, loving, responsible and healthy. In any event, the local news almost always cures me of any joy I might feel upon welcoming a new day.

Human sexuality, human sensual appetite has always been the source of profound joy. But just as our culture calls tragedy news - so this joy is made grim by the phenomenon of pornography. It is perhaps the irony or ironies that in the name of freedom and sexual stimulation, the pornographer is succeeding only in making his subject boring.

Television, that mirror of our culture, forced to back away from overt violence now gives us casual sex and mind-numbing trivia. It is not very happy. An evening watching television is guaranteed to produce intellectual stupor - and emotional depression.

The Christian Faith, in the meantime, holds out for a brave assertion about the human condition. It maintains that we were made to be happy. Again C.S. Lewis - the Senior devil is advising a junior... "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground... it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one..." (Ob.cit,p.49).

That's an astounding and liberating statement. Pleasure is God's invention. He made us to be happy. He gave us the capacity to enjoy ourselves. We don't have to feel bad about feeling good. Our religion doesn't have to be joyless.

Ernest Campbell quotes a prayer which was offered as a banquet invocation by a Roman Catholic priest in Boston. We have all endured banquet invocations - there are few things in life more grim. But listen to this one -

"We are especially happy to make this prayer, O Lord, and we hope you are to hear it, because this time we are not in church and not in trouble. As a rule when we speak to you, we are either kneeling against the background of a stained glass window, or buckling on a life preserver. It is either the routine of religion or the rush call for help. But today it is gloriously different. Today we want you to bless our joy as we stand poised for a few hours of genial festivity. Bless us then, O Lord, and in thy goodness, grant that the food may

be well flavored, the service smooth, and - if it isn't asking too much - the speeches short." (Locked in a Room With Open Doors, p.162: from Saturday Review, 12/62, Father John J. Hever).

Religion doesn't have to be grim. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not grim, until we make it that way. It begins with the premise that creation is good. We need, I think, to relearn that basic Christian assertion. The physical world, the world of things; trees, flowers, men and women, air and water, soil and concrete, automobiles and overcoats: the world that comes at us through our senses - that world is good. We need to relearn the basic Christian assertion that God created us for joy, that He gave us the capacity to experience joy; and we need, I think, to hear, in simple terms the Christian assertion that Jesus Christ is good news: the very best news in the world. Jesus Christ means that we are loved by God: that we are safe and free: that we may live life holding nothing back because the outcome of it all has already been decided.

Juergen Moltmann, very scholarly German theologian, in a book just published writes: "Where Jesus is, there is life. There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life and eternal life. There is life - before death. Or, as Jesus said himself - "These things I have said to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (Passion For Life, p.19).

Religion seasoned with joy puts our lives in perspective: punctures our pretensions and keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously - therefore freeing us to take God seriously. The Gospel is a gentle reminder that God loves us enough to laugh with us and even at us on occasion. It is a suggestion that religion - even religion - particularly religion - can be the source of joy, happiness and sometimes a marvelous and good and saving laugh.

The Junior High teacher in our Church School asked members of the class two weeks ago to identify something they could remember always believing in; something they would never stop believing in. She hoped they might say - God, Church, Love - or at least Parents. A twelve year old boy, as yet innocent of pretention, and as yet free of the burden of much theology, gave her the straightest answer he knew. Said he - "the Chicago Cubs." And I cherish the conviction that God laughed when He heard that one.

Amen.

God our Father, save us from ourselves. Save us from being grimly serious. Free us to experience the joy of creation: the pleasure of love: free us to laugh at the goodness of Your grace and mercy: through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Amen.